



Understanding Iran: a solution to the nuclear crisis?

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Summary: Western diplomats seeking to arrest the emergence of a nuclear Iran must acknowledge the motivations, grievances and insecurities that shape Iranian self-perception, its view of international relations and its nuclear ambitions. To date, the conventional formula for addressing violators of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) has been unable to stop Iran claiming what it sees as its sovereign right. For policy to be effective, diplomatic tactics and 'soft' tools will need a psychological nuance to coax and cajole Iran out of its questionable nuclear research program. The short term focus of these efforts must be on fostering more transparency and cooperation, not fomenting revolution.

The roots of Iranian action lie partly in the legacy of Western meddling and the regional vulnerabilities of the country itself. A combination of the two, mixed with a nationalist pride characteristic of the Iranian mindset, has fashioned a siege-like mentality, a propensity for self-reliance and a psychological rationale for nuclear protection: deterrence over détente.

The successful tapping by President Ahmadinejad into popular notions of Iran's regional and international status has provided him with the leeway to confront international opinion. Projecting Iran at home as a leading power and trumpeting its nuclear programme as symbols of modernity and independence has provided the Tehran government with widespread domestic support.

Policy-makers, however, cannot simply deal with Iran by distinguishing between the Islamic regime and the Iranian people, as proposed by President Bush in his State of the Union address. The relationship is complex. Intense national pride has paralleled public dissatisfaction with the government's handling of domestic issues, leaving Iran poised between reform and reaction since the death of Khomeini. The former Supreme Leader's 'neither east nor west, only Islam' vision no longer serves the aspirations of a well-educated people who are broadly sympathetic to Western culture and values.

To effect change in Iran's posture, the powers behind Ahmadinejad need to believe that current policies are counter-productive and dangerous to their established position. This would drain away the support of influential people in government already wary of the President's brinkmanship tactics. The aim in the short term, therefore, would be to bring about either a change in policy or in leadership, not to encourage revolution.

In the end, preventing Iran from going nuclear may be impossible, but persuading it to open up its research programme will be crucial to easing international tensions. This will require a psychological awareness in dealing with Iran that has hitherto been lacking.

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ROOTS OF IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY

The legacy of Western meddling is fresh in Iranian minds. This dates back to the nineteenth century when Iran was a pawn in the 'Great Game' between Russia and Britain. The country was occupied during the First World War and later invaded by a joint British-Soviet force in 1941. After the Second World War the Soviet refusal to withdraw from Iranian Azerbaijan was one of the first gambits of the Cold War. In 1953 a CIA-MI6 inspired coup toppled the government of Mohammed Mossadegh to install a pro-Western, yet authoritarian, regime under Mohammed Reza Shah. This cemented a US-Iranian strategic alliance that was to last until the 1979 Revolution.

Decisive historical events, such as the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, the overthrow of Mossadegh and the Islamic Revolution, had many causes but one common complaint: the interference of Western powers. The idea of historical injustice, warranted or not, affects the Iranian mindset and its perception of wider threats.

MOTIVATIONS OF THE CURRENT LEADERSHIP

These wider security concerns are important elements in the current formulation of Iranian foreign policy. Iran is hemmed in by intersecting conflicts and transnational threats – a regional arc of crisis. It is the only non-Arab, Shi'a Islamist state in the Middle East. Flashpoints in Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Iraq threaten its security. A nuclear Russia resides to the north, holding together unstable southern regions. To its west an expanding EU may one day appear on its doorstep with Turkey's accession, a country already mistrusted as a US 'proxy'. East is a weak nuclear Pakistan clashing with India over Kashmir while trying to contain a large number of militant Sunni fundamentalists. To its south-west is the US army in Iraq, while a nuclear Israel has openly declared a first-strike policy against Iran. It is America's pre-emptive strategy, however, which fuses counter-terrorism and counter-proliferation, which is the greatest threat. It brought the US to Kabul and Baghdad.

The policies of President Ahmadinejad's government also have strong domestic origins. Since the death of Khomeini, Iran has oscillated between reform and radicalism and remains a society in an acute state of flux. Unemployment is high; seventy per cent of the population is under 30; student protests shook the regime in 1999, 2002 and 2003; NGOs are increasingly trying to promote social change. A quarter of a century of hardline politics has left most Iranians bored with 'death chants', disgusted by police and militia brutality and disgruntled at the lack of employment and prosperity. International polls from Pew and Zogby reveal that Iranians are extremely pro-American relative to many countries in the region. Large swathes of the middle-class and youth population subscribe enthusiastically to Western values and culture. Yet many Iranians are nationalist and overtly proud of their country. Its history, culture, power and status command great respect in the Middle East.

Ahmadinejad straddles this national dichotomy – supporting a manifestly anti-Western regime while simultaneously buying into the products and values of Western societies – by tapping into this sense of national pride. His rhetoric rallies the nation behind a government policy that is not of direct importance to individual Iranians. Growing the economy and creating jobs, providing security and opportunity for millions of Iranians are of greater urgency, but provide little public room for manoeuvre when confronting the IAEA and United Nations Security Council. These firebrand tactics stoke up public support for an otherwise dangerous policy: pressing ahead with an ambiguous nuclear research programme despite international condemnation. With national backing,

Ahmadinejad is more able to placate voices in government worried about his psychological game of brinkmanship with the EU, US and now Russia and China. The President of Iran is walking a fine line between overly aggravating reactions abroad and shoring up support at home, both in the streets and in the corridors of power.

POLICY TO EFFECT CHANGE

Recent changes on the international scene have made Ahmadinejad's position more tenuous. Previously, Iran played off divisions between the US and EU and deployed the same tactics in the UN Security Council. Now a united front in the UNSC has been created after Iran uncompromisingly re-started its nuclear programme, causing a stir in Moscow and Beijing. Such a situation could expose divisions within the regime and cause the religious oligarchy to reassess how far it should pursue its nuclear brinkmanship. It is these divisions that need to be exploited through further diplomatic measures and 'soft' tools.

Pressure from the Iranian public could help to divide the religious leaders behind Ahmadinejad. The psychological disposition that Ahmadinejad manipulates can equally be exploited to achieve such an outcome. Separating the Iranian government from the Iranian people – a strategy pursued by the Bush Administration – is an oversimplified solution we already see does not work. The complexities of the relationship the Iranian people have with their government are tightly coiled around the paradoxes that exist in the country: voting for an anti-Western demagogue yet sympathising with Western values; dislike for the hardline regime yet pride in its nationalist rhetoric. Creating a wedge between the two may not be viable, or even desirable. Revolution will not necessarily be the most beneficial outcome. For the moment, the immediate concern should be opening up Iran's nuclear programme, not replacing the extremist regime that drives it.

To create this upward pressure that will create anxiety and disunion in the Iranian government, Iranians need to feel that the nationalist rhetoric they follow is in fact detrimental to their nationalist instincts. To continue on the aggressive path taken by Ahmadinejad would diminish Iran's status and prestige, not amplify it. This approach will require deft manipulation of 'soft' tools including an active and successful public diplomacy programme.

These 'soft' tools should be directed at symbols of national pride, ideas of national superiority and assumptions of national greatness. All these need to be challenged. The more Tehran tries to elevate nuclear technology as a monument to Persian advancement the more Iran should lose its status in the world. A variety of measures drawn from numerous spheres of public life would need to be employed. Cultural, sporting, educational, spiritual, diplomatic and other activities would provide grounds for 'denting the Iranian ego'. International pressure could threaten to have Iran banned from the World Cup – many Iranians are football fanatics – if it does not comply with demands for transparency. Freezing all finance for the Iranian cinema industry – a national symbol of pride – would dampen their cultural prestige. Pressing the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) to remove Iran temporarily from any committees or even suspend its membership would reduce its influence in the Islamic world.

A critical condition for these measures to function is that they do not impinge upon individuals directly. Scholarships, cultural exchanges and visas should still be permitted.

Economic sanctions should be avoided as much as possible. They have a past history of failure – witness Iraq – and would do little but impoverish ordinary Iranians. Iran should also not be isolated along the lines of North Korea. Constructive dialogue should be available and engagement continued along diplomatic fronts, official and unofficial. The process of referral to the UNSC and inspections of the IAEA should proceed to apply traditional pressure upon the government.

The Iranian government's rhetoric would no doubt vilify any actions made by the international community and label them as unwarranted. To ensure that these measures are successful, an effective public diplomacy programme must be in place. This will inform Iranians that they *are* wanted in the World Cup, the world *does* want to watch their films, Iran *is* welcome back to the OIC and, of course, *is* free to develop a civilian nuclear programme. The information policy would emphasise that Iran's nuclear programme would have to be peaceful, within the parameters of the NPT and performed under the watchful eye of the IAEA. Condoleezza Rice's recent request for an additional US\$75 million from Congress to increase information penetration into Iran with 24-hour television and radio stations is a step in this direction. Learning from Iraq – where public reception of US-backed channels is mixed, will be essential to gain a large market share and avoid criticisms of bias and prejudice.

CONCLUSION: DIFFUSING THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR CRISIS

Three acknowledgments must be made if the Iranian nuclear crisis is to be diffused. Firstly, to make a clear distinction between the Iranian government and its people is a gross oversimplification that will only lead to ineffective policies. Secondly, policies must focus on the short term goal of changing Iranian policy or leadership, but not the regime itself. Thirdly, the ambitions of leaders wanting to halt Iran's nuclear research programme must qualify their objectives. What is realistic? Can Iran be indefinitely prevented from developing nuclear technology? Libya succumbed to financial penalties and diplomatic isolation, but Iran is more likely to prioritise national pride above economic growth. It is also within Iran's sovereign right to develop such technology. Realistically, the demands of the international community should be that of transparency and cooperation. The relationship between Iran's research facilities and its military R&D is unclear and the source of major international tension. To exploit and increase the disunity existing in the religious oligarchy that sanctions Ahmadinejad's policies will require measures that demote Iran's status without isolating it, damage national pride without inflicting misfortune on individuals. An effective public diplomacy program would be critical to prevent Tehran from misrepresenting international efforts – which would stir up further nationalism and galvanise the country. Understanding this psychological disposition of the Iranian leadership and its people might provide the extra leverage needed to persuade Ahmadinejad to back down.